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A COMPARISON OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN THE  
UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN

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Party identification is a well established concept in American political science. People may disagree over whether it is best interpreted in a psychological or information theoretic framework, but the notion that voters form standing commitments to their parties is widely accepted in the U.S.. Bearing in mind evidence that party identification and short term forces are not as neatly separable as was once thought, there is still little doubt that party identification and vote variables measure different phenomena.

The status of party identification in Great Britain is more dubious. It seems to be harder to distinguish party identification from vote intention. The conventional wisdom since the publication of Butler and Stokes' Political Change in Britain has been that when voters indicate that they generally think of themselves as Conservative or Labour, they are merely reporting their current vote intention. British voters allegedly are less able to distinguish their general partisan inclinations from their decision to support a particular party at a particular point in time. As Butler and Stokes themselves concluded, "The difference between the two countries seems therefore to mainly reside in the extent to which there is an explicit and generalized belief that the voter forms about his relationship to party, one that can survive deviating choices in the ballot box."(p.31).

Their finding has stimulated various attempts to use surrogate measures of voters' predispositions, (Budge et al, 1976) and created a general ambivalence about the concept of party identification itself. (Crewe et al, 1977).

This confusion about the value of party identification cross-nationally seems to us an unsatisfactory state of affairs. Are conditions in other countries like the U.K. really so different that a concept as fundamental as party identification is only relevant to the American electorate? We propose therefore to reexamine the conventional wisdom about party identification in Great Britain by looking at two questions: (1) are party identification and current vote intention really indistinguishable in Great Britain, and (2) how can we account for Butler and Stokes' finding that party identification is less stable and tends to covary with the vote more in Great Britain than in the U.S.. The first question concerns the property of independence, and the second, the property of stability.

#### THE INDEPENDENCE OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND THE VOTE

The property of independence holds that party identification and the vote should not be identical. If it were otherwise, party identification would be redundant. We could simply use a person's vote as a measure of his general partisan inclinations; his standing decision would be his most recent voting decision. The reason we expect party identification and the vote not to be equivalent is that a person's vote ( $v_t$ ) at time  $t$  consists of his standing decision ( $pid_t$ ) and short term forces ( $stf_t$ ). Short term forces include, as we shall

see in a moment, local candidate evaluations, specific policy evaluations and national leadership evaluations. Short term forces can provide two sorts of information for voters. One is information which updates a person's standing decision -- i.e. information that affirms, or causes you to change your normal party affiliation. The other is information that causes you to deviate from but not change your normal party affiliation. The latter, in other words, is information about a particular candidate or policy which causes you to make an exception to your standing decision at a particular point in time.

Consider, for illustrative purposes, three types of short term forces:

(1) Local Candidate Evaluations. In both the British parliamentary and the American Congressional elections, voters must signify a preference for a particular candidate. While the party label provides the voter with some general expectations about the candidate, it is quite likely that the voter will acquire additional information about the candidate in the course of the campaign or during the incumbent's term in office. Thus, a voter might say to himself "Normally, I prefer the Republicans, but this candidate is so undesirable that I will vote for the Democratic candidate instead." To some extent, the discipline of the British parliamentary system ought to weaken the importance of the individual candidate characteristics as compared to the U.S., but it is likely that some British politicians attain enough visibility in their constituencies to have a significant effect.

(2) National Party Leaders. Leadership of the parties in both Great Britain and the United States is usually contested by rival

factions within the party: for example, the Bow group versus the Monday club in the Conservative party, the Tribunists versus the Revisionist Socialists in the Labour party, the radical right versus the moderates in the Republican party, and the Southern Dixiecrats versus the Northern Liberals in the Democratic party. Control of the party by one faction can alter the perceived likely behavior and goals of the party in important and undesirable ways. Thus, a voter might say, "Normally, I feel closer to the Republicans, but a particular group of national leaders controls the party or influences the behavior of the party in such a manner that I will vote for the Democrats in this election."

(3) Specific Policies. The expectations that individuals form about normal party behavior are based in good part on observations of the policies pursued in office and advocated during the campaign. Hence, it is possible to perceive that a party's policies are normally better, but to prefer another party on one particular issue. Partisan defection then becomes for the voter a means towards the achievement of a particular policy result, or a way of sending a message to the party in order to get it to alter its behavior. Thus, a voter might say, "Normally, I prefer the Republicans, but they are acting against my interests in this matter, and I want them to know this." Examples of the latter in Great Britain might be defections from Labour over immigration in the sixties, or defections from the Conservatives to the Liberals in the early seventies over confrontation politics.

To argue that party identification and the vote are equivalent, it is not necessary to show that the correlation between them is perfect.

In fact, it is not. The rate of defection (i.e. voting for a party other than the one you identify with) has varied in Great Britain. In the 1964 and 1966 elections, approximately 4 percent of those sampled voted for a party other than the one they identified with while in 1974, the figure was 11 percent. One need only argue that the correlation between party identification and the vote is imperfect because of random error. The "equivalence" hypothesis is thus

$$(1) \quad V_t - PID_t = u$$

where

$V_t$  is an individual's vote at time  $t$

$PID_t$  is an individual's party identification at time  $t$

$u$  is a random disturbance term caused by measurement error or the idiosyncratic traits of certain voters.

The "independence" hypothesis maintains that the difference between voting intention and party identification is caused by both systematic short term forces and random error. The "independence hypothesis" is thus

$$(2) \quad V_t - PID_t = STF_t + u$$

where

$STF_t$  are short term forces such as candidate and policy evaluations.

If the "equivalence" hypothesis holds in Great Britain but not in the United States, then it is valid to say that party identification is redundant in Great Britain and is merely another measure of current vote intention. If the "independence" hypothesis holds, then party identification and current vote intention are not equivalent, but differ by the impact of short term forces that cause voters to deviate from their normal allegiances.

This gives us a test of independence. By estimating the probability of defection as a function of short term forces, we can determine whether the divergence between party identification and the vote is caused by systematic factors or by random error alone. Formally, the equation is

$$(3) \quad Y = B_1 + B_2 STF_t + u$$

where

$Y$  is the probability of voting for a party other than the one the respondent normally identifies with or  $V_t - PID_t$

$STF_t$  are short term forces in the form of variables for local candidate evaluations (LCE), national party leadership evaluations (NPLE) and specific policy evaluations (SPE)

The independence of party identification and the vote is determined by the hypothesis test of the coefficient  $B_2$ . If  $B_2$  is not significantly different from zero, then the deviations of vote

from party identification are the result of random disturbances, or at least factors that we cannot identify. If  $B_2$  is significantly different from zero, then current vote intention varies from PID as the result of short term forces.

To keep within the time period of the original Butler and Stokes findings, we have taken the 1958 Congressional election and the 1964 parliamentary elections as the data bases. The independent variables for both Britain and the U.S. are from the open-ended codes, using only references to the personal qualities and competence in the national leadership and local candidate evaluation variables.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of coding procedures for the independent variables were explored, and each was found to have its own peculiar advantages and disadvantages.<sup>2</sup> However, the results were consistently similar across all procedures, and we present one here which is commonly used, plausible and representative. It consists of first creating positive and negative mention variables for each of the three categories and for both the party one identifies with and the other party. This gives us 12 variables in all, or 4 for each category of non-generalized cue. The composite measure simply takes the net of the positive and negative mention variables to form evaluations in each of the three categories for both the party identified with and the other, and then takes the difference between them in each category. This gives us a variable for each category which tells us whether on balance -- between positive and negative mentions -- the voter prefers the party identified with or the other. The expected sign of these variables is negative since the composite value is the score of the party identified with minus

that of the other party and therefore the probability of defecting should increase as the evaluation variable is less than zero and should decrease as it is greater than zero.<sup>3</sup>

The results of the estimations appear in Tables I and II

[INSERT TABLES I AND II HERE]

The equations were estimated with a maximum likelihood logit procedure for Democratic and Republican identifiers only with the American data and for the Conservatives and Labour only with the British data. In both the American and British cases, there appear to be statistically significant parameters with the correct signs which account for partisan defections. The major difference between the American and British equations seems to be that for the periods under consideration, the national leadership cue is statistically significant in Great Britain and not in the U.S., but it would be risky to speculate on the meaning of this without replicating the procedures over several years. The more important observation is that partisan defections in both Great Britain and the U.S. can be explained by statistically significant behavioral parameters and are not simply the artifacts of measurement errors. Apparently, contradictory short term forces will cause partisan defections in both countries, and party identification will not be synonymous with the vote in either political system when these cues are salient.

#### STABILITY AND PARTY IDENTIFICATION

While we have seen that party identification and the vote are

TABLE I  
Probability of Partisan Defections in  
US Congressional Elections 1958

	Coefficient	T-Test	Chi-Square
Local Candidate Evaluation	-1.08	7.7	59.96
National Leadership Evaluation	- .06	.59	.35
Policies Evaluation	- .42	4.56	20.86
Constant	-1.62		
Chi-Square for Equation	97.98		

TABLE II

Probability of Partisan Defections in  
British Parliamentary Elections 1964

	Coefficient	T-Test	Chi-Square
Local Candidate Evaluation	-2.28	2.09	4.39
National Leadership Evaluation	- .86	4.45	19.87
Policies Evaluation	- .67	3.50	12.30
Constant	-3.71		
Chi-square for Equation	35.78		

independent in Great Britain, just as they are in the U.S., we are still left with the disturbing Butler and Stokes finding that party identification is more stable in the U.S. than in Great Britain, and that party identification and the vote covary more closely in Great Britain than in the U.S.. The first question, of course, is why should stability matter at all.

The expectation that party identification should be stable derives from the concept itself. Party identification is supposed to measure a person's standing commitment to a party. While an individual's vote will change under the influence of short term forces, party identification should remain fairly stable, if indeed it measures what it is supposed to measure. An individual's standing commitment is based on three main factors. First, there is the person's family background. The original Michigan idea was that political affiliations, along with other socialized values, were transmitted across generations within a family; you became a Labourite or a Conservative because, in essence, you were brought up that way. A second cause of long term partisan affiliations is an individual's socioeconomic status. Butler and Stokes describe how individuals who see themselves as middle or working class are more likely to identify with the party of that class. As long as the individual does not move up or down the occupational ladder, class pressures should exert a relatively constant effect over an individual's political beliefs. Finally, a third component of party identification is the memory or association of past policy outcomes with a particular party. Over the years, individuals observe many party policy decisions, and on this basis,

form expectations about how the party normally behaves in office and how this normally affects their welfare. Even though this memory may be updated by recent events, an individual's normal expectations would change fairly slowly since this memory consists of many observations built up over time. Thus, like the biases of family socialization and class background, the expectation of normal party performance should be relatively stable over time.

If we believe that roughly similar components go into the formation of party identification in the U.S. and the U.K., why should there be important differences in the relative stability of party identification and the vote in the two countries? Perhaps, then, we should look more closely at the original Butler and Stokes finding to understand better the basis of their claims.

As evidence, Butler and Stokes presented the following tables:

[TABLE III AND IV HERE]

Partisan self-image was coded as stable for a three year panel if an individual identified with the same party for all three years and as variable if the individual identified with two different parties and was never an independent over the three years. Voting preference was coded as stable if the individual voted for the same party in each election and variable if he voted for two different parties over the period and never abstained. The statement that party identification is more stable in the U.S. than in Great Britain is based on the marginals of these tables which show that while ninety-two percent of the United States electorate identified with the same party every

TABLE III

Stability of Partisan Self-Image and Voting Preference for Parliament 1963-1964-1966

		Voting Preference		
		stable	variable	
Partisan Self-Image	stable	75	8	83
	variable	4	13	17
		79	21	



TABLE IV

Stability of Partisan Self-Image and Voting  
Preference for Congress 1956-1958-1960

Party Preference in Voting for Congress

		stable	variable	
Partisan Self-Image	stable	76	16	92
	variable	2	6	8
		78	22	

year, the corresponding figure for Great Britain was eighty-three percent.

The tables from which Butler and Stokes draw these conclusions rest on two crucial suppositions. The first was that if a voter declared himself or herself an independent in any of the three surveys, that person was excluded from the calculations. This had two consequences.

First, since there is a larger population of independents in the U.S., this decision led to the omission of a substantial fraction of the sample. Although Butler and Stokes do not say how they constructed these tables, attempts to reproduce them indicate that they classified independent leaners as party identifiers and used therefore the most narrow definition of independent in their coding. Nevertheless, Table I seems to be based on twenty-five percent of the respondents in the U.S. panel and Table II on seventy-one percent of the British panel respondents.

Secondly, it meant that if someone identified with the Democrats, in 1956 and 1958, but with the independents in 1960, that person was excluded from the table altogether. The effect of this we will argue is to underestimate the variability of party identification, especially since independents are such a large segment of the U.S. electorate. Our expectations in this regard are confirmed in Table V where the independents have been included in the analysis.

[TABLE V HERE]

Apparently, when independents are added to the American Table, there is essentially no difference in the stability of party identification between the two countries over the three year period.

TABLE V

Partisan Self-Image in U.S. and G.B. when U.S.  
Independents are Treated as a Third Party

	stable	variable	
G.B.	79.7	20.3	n = 1181
U.S.	78.1	21.9	n = 1197

Of course, an important corollary of the Butler and Stokes argument was that party identification in the U.S. exhibits more of a tendency to remain stable when vote preference is shifting than in Great Britain. Again, turning to Table I and II, Butler and Stokes show that the ratio of those with stable party identifications and variable votes to those with variable party identifications and stable votes was eight to one in the U.S. and only two to one in the U.K. Moreover, only six percent of those in the U.S. table have variable votes and variable party identification while the corresponding number in Great Britain is fourteen percent.

How do these tables compare when the independents are altered?

[TABLE VI HERE]

Notice that the ratio of those with stable partisan identification and variable vote to those with variable identifications and stable votes when the independents are treated like the Liberals in Great Britain is about two to one in both countries. Clearly, the decision to exclude the independents in the American case underestimates the variability of party identification and overestimates the ratio of those with stable party identification and variable votes to those with variable party identification and stable votes.

The second crucial feature of the Butler and Stokes analysis is that it included the Liberals in the British table. Here again, one might have a priori doubts about the value of comparing the party identifications of minor party voters with those of major party voters. There are good reasons to expect that the party identifications of the

TABLE VI

Stability of Partisan Self-Image and Voting  
Preference for Congress 1956-1958-1960  
(Independents Included)

		Vote		
		stable	variable	
Partisan Self-Image	stable	66.6	16.2	82.8
	variable	7.0	10.2	17.2
		73.6	26.4	n = 569

Liberals will be less stable than those of the more established parties. Both the Liberal surge of the early sixties and the most recent revival in 1974 were followed by rapid declines in voter support. Institutional barriers to representation as well as widespread uncertainty about what the Liberals stand for can be expected to cause a more rapid conversion in and out of the Liberal ranks than in the cases of the Conservative and Labour parties. Thus, we would predict that including the Liberals in these tables underestimates the stability of partisanship in Great Britain relative to the U.S.

Again, our expectations are confirmed. In Table V we see that excluding the Liberals as well as the independents yields comparable levels of partisan stability in the U.S. and the U.K. Similarly, excluding the Liberals from Table VII shows that the ratio of the stable party identification and variable vote to variable party identification and stable vote becomes three to one rather than the previous two to one.

[TABLE VII AND VIII HERE]

The conclusion seems to be therefore that the original Butler and Stokes finding was highly dependent on its assumptions about which party identifications should be compared. The decision to include the Liberals and to exclude the independents resulted in an underestimate of stability in the British case and an overestimate of stability in the American case. If instead one compares the major parties in both countries only, the results across the two countries are far more similar. Alternatively, if one wanted to argue that identifying with the Liberals in Great Britain and the independents in the U.S. were

TABLE VII

Partisan Self-Image in U.S. and G.B. with  
Liberals and Independents Excluded

	stable	variable	
G.B.	90.3	9.7	n = 965
U.S.	90.1	9.9	n = 1008

TABLE VIII

Stability of Partisan Self-Image and Voting  
Preference for Parliament 1963-1964-1966  
(Liberals Excluded)

		Vote		
		Stable	Variable	
PID	stable	85.1	7.1	92.2
	variable	2.0	5.8	7.8
		87.1	12.9	n = 783

both reactions to the policies of the established parties, once again the results would be comparable across countries.

Clearly, there are important trade-offs to consider when making cross-national comparisons. The point is simply that before discarding party identification as a useful measure in Great Britain, one should look closely at the evidence, and in particular the assumptions behind the evidence. Should we expect the party identifications of minor party voters to be as stable as those of the major voters? Is an identification with a middle of the road third party similar to an identification with independence in the U.S.? If we have reason to believe that the answers to either or both of these questions is yes, then it is possible that the widespread skepticism about the value of party identification in a British context is unfounded.

#### CONCLUSION

We have shown in this paper that party identification in Great Britain satisfies the criteria of independence and stability, and that on these grounds, it should be considered as valid a concept as in the United States. Further, we have shown that the level of partisan stability and independence will vary with political circumstances. Does this mean that party identification varies in its usefulness? That depends on what one means by useful. As party identification becomes more independent due to salient contradictory cues, it may be less useful to the voter as a guide to behavior, but no less useful to the political scientist as a standard by which to measure political change. On the other hand, periods in which contradictory cues are

less salient may be those in which the voter finds party identification more useful while the political scientist finds party identification harder to distinguish from actual behavior. We would suggest that this irony has been the source of much confusion about the value of party identification in Great Britain.

## FOOTNOTES

1. For the U.S. data in 1958, the local candidate mentions come from the congressional candidate master code while the national leadership and issue variable mentions come from the party master code. For the British data, all variables are constructed from the master party code.
2. A common objection to open ended coding is that the underlying psychological assumption is very naive: namely, that the more positive things an individual can recall about x, the higher his or her evaluation of x will be. One is thus tempted to try alternatives which do not differentiate between the number of mentions. Curiously, however uneasy one may feel about using codings which count they seem to work as well or better than the other alternatives by almost all statistical criteria.
3. To take an example, we have positive and negative mentions of the local candidate of the party identified with and the party not identified with. The difference between positive and negative mentions is the net for the party identified with and the other party.
 
$$(\text{Positive} - \text{Negative}) = \text{Net Party Identified With}$$

$$(\text{Positive} - \text{Negative}) = \text{Net for other Party.}$$

The combined score is the difference between the two scores

$$(\text{Net Party Identified With} - \text{Net for Other}) = \text{Combined Score.}$$

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